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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 001047

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/12/2017

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: LOW EXPECTATIONS FOR PARIS CONFERENCE

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Lebanese political representatives have low expectations for the July 14-17 conference in St. Cloud, outside Paris, though many tell us they note a change in tone and rhetoric from some of Lebanon's more militant parties, such as Hizballah. The French also harbor no illusions about the conference -- bringing the opposing parties together at one table already is a coup in and of itself -- but are hopeful it will pave the way for further dialogue and peaceful presidential elections this fall. France plans to issue a very general communique on the conference results.
End summary.

LOW EXPECTATIONS AMONG PARTICIPANTS

12. (C) This past week we spoke with advisors to PM Siniora, Amal leader Nabih Berri, Future Movement leader Saad Hariri, Free Patriotic Movement leader General Michel Aoun, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, and others about their expectations for the July 14-17 conference, aimed at promoting dialogue among the feuding Lebanese factions. While consensus across the board was the conference would not yield much in terms of concrete results, most also cited the fact that the various Lebanese parties will come together to talk at one table as a positive development.

-- PM Senior Aide Mohamad Chatah told Charge on July 9 he had low expectations for the conference, which he will attend as one of two representatives of Siniora. The best case outcome, he said, is a decision to have a follow on meeting of more senior leaders in Beirut. Another outcome might be simply to continue having dialogue at some other level. Nader Hariri, advisor (and cousin) to Saad Hariri, echoed Chatah's prediction of low expectations.

-- Ibrahim Kenaan, who will represent Aoun, said he did not expect the dialogue process to resolve any of the difficult political issues, but hoped the conference would create a new dynamic that would eventually lead to real progress. Any positive outcome in Paris would depend on the participants' real intentions. According to Kenaan, the French would probably push for some common ground among the participants in a declaration of intentions.

-- Lebanese Forces advisors Joseph Nehmeh (who will attend the Paris conference) and Elie Khoury told us July 12 that,

while they harbored no major expectations for the conference, they had noticed a change of attitude of late among many party leaders. Many had softened their tone and now appeared more willing to participate constructively in discussions.

-- Armenian party Tashnaq MP Hagop Prakaduni, a member of the Armenian delegation, told us he does not expect the Paris talks to result in real solutions, but hopes to see an agreement over a national unity cabinet. Such a cabinet would prevent a constitutional vacuum in case parliament fails to elect a new president by the constitutional deadline, he explained. He himself, as an Aoun parliamentary bloc coalition member, supports Aoun's candidacy for the presidency, but noted Aoun cannot become president in the current political situation. Prakaduni stressed that the Armenian community will be represented by one delegation in Paris, although the other two delegates are affiliated with the Hariri Future movement bloc.

HIZBALLAH EXPECTED TO BE ON GOOD BEHAVIOR

13. (C) Hizballah still plans to attend the conference, despite recent comments by French President Sarkozy characterizing Hizballah's military operations as "terrorism." Resigned Energy and Water Minister Mohamed Fneish, one of two Hizballah representatives at the conference, retorted, "we are not a terrorist movement, we are a resistance movement," adding that if Hizballah was a terrorist group, "why are we invited to participate in the conference?" The delegates we spoke with agreed that Fneish would play a constructive role at the conference, though many noted that the other Hizballah representative, Nawaf

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Moussawi, tends to be a gruffer interlocutor.

-- Chatah told us he thought France had pressured Hizballah to upgrade its representation to minister, a move interpreted by some as an effort to demonstrate Hizballah's moderation and willingness to dialogue.

-- Fneish reportedly told Kenaan recently that Hizballah's focus will be on backing state-building initiatives, such as better electoral laws. Kenaan also believes Hizballah will be more "reasonable" on internal Lebanese issues in the future.

-- Nehmeh, who also participated in the Swiss initiative, singled out Hizballah's less militant posturing in Geneva as an example of more moderate tones, predicting that in the future Hizballah would be more focused on internal Lebanese issues rather than always bowing to outside pressures. Nehmeh hoped the apparent change in attitude also signified a more moderate stance on issues such as Hizballah's "resistance" against Israel. Khoury added that Hizballah's presence at the conference gave it an opportunity to gain Europe's good graces "via the French gate."

-- Prakaduni, noting that the Armenian party delegation met with Hizballah Secretary General Nasrallah July 2, shortly after he nominated Minister Fneish to head the Hizballah delegation, said Fneish is somehow moderate and makes a good impression at such conferences.

FRENCH ALSO SET THEIR SIGHTS LOW

14. (C) The French also admit to no grand expectations for the conference. According to French Political Officer Brigitte Curmi, Paris views the fact that all the parties accepted the invitation and are sending relatively high-level representatives as a coup in and of itself; having them sit together at one table and discuss their differences is enough to make the conference a success. Curmi confirmed the French Embassy also is seeing evidence of toned-down rhetoric that

could signal a shift, in attitude if not substance, of the different parties.

15. (C) Curmi described the conference's formula as follows: Delegates arrive midday Saturday. Saturday afternoon the conference moderators will pose two questions: 1) What do the participants see as the major issues that are blocking Lebanon's political process; and 2) What can be done to fix these problems? This session is intended to be "cathartic," Curmi explained, allowing the representatives to get things off their chests and out in the open. Response time will be limited for each delegate. Sunday's sessions will then focus on the following questions: What general principles (i.e., Lebanese independence, sanctity of the Taif accords, etc.) do the parties believe in? In which areas are there agreement? How can the parties use these commonalties to find a way out of the current impasse?

16. (C) Bearing no illusions that the Lebanese representatives would leave their political baggage at the door, Curmi said the conference is meant to be a brainstorming session where the different parties have the opportunity to talk privately and freely, and where their French hosts hope they can discuss the core issues facing Lebanon (a discussion long overdue, in Curmi's mind). Less academic than last month's meeting in Switzerland (though many of the attendees are the same), the Paris conference is intended to help create a dialogue in the short-term that can continue back in Lebanon, paving a positive foundation for this fall's presidential election in the medium-term and political stability in the long-term.

COMMUNIQUE WILL HAVE NO SURPRISES

17. (C) Telecommunications Minister Marwan Hamadeh told the Ambassador July 11 (just before leaving for Paris, where he and MP Akram Chehayeb will represent Walid Jumblatt) that French Ambassador Bernard Emie had quietly shown him the draft communique the French plan to issue at the end of the St. Cloud conference. As this will be a French document, the French are not striving for consensus among the participants.

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18. (C) As described by Hamadeh, the two-page document is currently in an outline form, with several sections. The first section deals with principles, such as commitment to Lebanon's unity, peaceful relations among the communities, the Taif accord (which will cause Michel Aoun's supporters some discomfort), and so on. The other three sections deal with short, medium, and long-term goals. The short-term goals include a national unity cabinet "with certain guarantees" (i.e., addressing March 14 paranoia about a national unity cabinet being a trick to collapse the Siniora cabinet) and having presidential elections on time. Medium term goals include a credible legislative election law and the implementation of the 2006 national dialogue decisions. Longer-term goals include the full implementation of Taif (suggesting disarmament of militias, but not explicitly) and the deconfessionalism of the bureaucracy (combined with the compensatory steps envisioned in Taif, such as the establishment of the Senate, the participation in which would be based on confessionalism, and decentralization).

19. (C) French Ambassador Bernard Emie in general terms confirmed to the Ambassador Hamadeh's description of the proposed document. "There are no surprises," he said. Emie also said that the most difficult issue for the French -- now that Hizballah has agreed to participate -- is the question of any follow-up mechanism. The French do not want to have simply a one-time conference. On the theory that the conference itself contributed to a lowering of tensions and a postponement of "bad decisions," there needs to be something else on the calendar. The French had proposed another get

together on September 4, but Siniora and Jumblatt had said that was too far away.

POLITICAL PARTY REPRESENTATIVES

Ali Hamdan and Mahmud Berri (representing Amal)

Minister of Parliamentary Affairs Michel Pharaon and
Ambassador Mohamad Chatah (representing PM Siniora)

MP Antoine Ghanem and Salim Sayegh, representing former
resident Amine Gemayel

MP Ibrahim Kanaan and Simon Abi Ramia, representing MP Michel
Aoun

Acting Foreign Minister Ahmad Fatfat and Nabil de Freij,
representing MP Saad Hariri

Telecommunications Minister Marwan Hamadeh and Akram
Shuhayyeb, representing MP Walid Jumblatt

MP George Adwan and Joseph Nehmen, representing Lebanese
Forces leader Samir Geagea

Hagop Pakradunian, Yeghia Jerjian and Hagop Kasarjian,
Armenian bloc

MP Jawad Boulos, representing MPs Boutros Harb, Nayla Mouawad
and Elias Attallah

Resigned Energy Minister Mohamad Fneish and Nawaf Moussawi,
representing Hizballah

Michel Tueni, representing MP Ghassan Tueni

MP Qassem Abed al-Aziz and Antoine Constantine, representing
the Tripoli bloc of Transportation and Public Works Minister
Mohamad Safadi

MP Camille Maaluf and (retired) Judge Josphe Jereissati,
representing MP Elie Skaff and his Greek Catholic bloc

Mrs. Mirna Murr, representing Michel Murr

CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPANTS

Former Minister Ghassan Salame

Lawyer Ziad Baroud

Professor Joe Mailla

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Lawyer Ghaleb Mahmassani

Kamel Mehanna

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